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Why the Brexit debate risks exacerbating division in Northern Ireland

Katy Hayward

The official launch of the EU referendum campaigns has been characterised by Anglo-centricity. Whilst media coverage focuses on personalities and politicking operating in tight circles around Westminster, the people who would be most acutely affected by Brexit are made quite peripheral to the debate. Of these, the residents of Northern Ireland – location of the UK's only land border with the EU – are perhaps the most marginalised of all.

There is a certain irony in this given that the legitimisation of regional needs and interests within the EU has worked to compensate for their comparative invisibility within some national contexts, including the UK. The dispersal of power away from member state governments through European integration has not only been channelled 'upwards' to the supranational level but also 'down' to the regions.

In actual fact, there are few European regions that have benefited quite so evidently from EU membership as Northern Ireland. From a special funding stream (for Peace and Reconciliation) to a dedicated EU Commission Task Force (to 'help the region participate more actively in the EU policy process'),ⁱ Northern Ireland has been the focus of a level of external interest quite disproportionate to its size. The primary reason for this sustained EU attention is, of course, the untypical history of this corner of Europe. Violent conflict emerged in its most modern form in the midst of the UK and Ireland's negotiations to join the EEC. The worst years of the Troubles and British-Irish intergovernmental tension coincided with the first years of Community membership.

Integration into a European Union offered the chance for reworking the fundamental relationships and parameters behind this antagonism. Unionists were apprehensive of the consequences of such diversification and clamoured for British protection against such unwarranted 'interference'. But the introduction (in 1979) of direct elections to the European Parliament added impetus to Irish nationalists' wish for a wider audience and an internationalised contribution to the search for peace in Northern Ireland. In particular, nationalist MEP John Hume's push for EEC engagement contributed to its commissioning the Haagerup Report (1984), which identified the core issue as being one of competing sovereignties.

According to this view (which has since become the predominant narrative on the conflict), Northern Ireland is regarded as the 'problem child' of two divorcing national projects: Irish and British. On the one hand, this interpretation gives the Irish state legitimate involvement in the future of Northern Ireland; on the other, it implies that Northern Ireland's position becomes more 'vulnerable' as the grip of British sovereignty wanes.

Differing unionist and nationalist responses to the prospect of Brexit can only be fully understood in this light. Nationalists (including the traditionally Eurosceptic Sinn Féin) see EU membership as a vital lifeline extending beyond UK borders, most especially to the Republic of Ireland. As with some Scottish nationalists, many claim that a Brexit could prompt the breakup of the UK into its component regions or, even more controversially, it could escalate momentum towards a 'border poll' for Irish reunification.

Unionists, on the other hand, have seen always EU membership as a frustrating constraint on – if not direct infringement of – UK sovereignty. Reflecting cultural roots in Protestant conservatism, unionists' willingness to compromise is publically constrained by their wariness of moving from a position based on absolute principles to one swayed by pragmatism. Yet such a shift is evident in the decision of the centrist Ulster Unionist Party to come out cautiously in favour of remaining in the EU – a position that reflects its historical alignment with the British Conservative Party. However, the more hardline 'principled' position of the largest Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) continues the logic of securing the future of Northern Ireland by forceful rejection of any concession of British sovereignty.

As DUP Leader, the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive, Arlene Foster, has pronounced her support for leaving the EU; taken along with the fact that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Teresa Villiers, is one of the senior Cabinet members allied with the Vote Leave campaign, the context for the political debate here is quite different again to any other region of the UK.

What makes this all the more significant is that the elections to the Northern Ireland regional Assembly take place on 5th May, some six weeks prior to the referendum. The results of the 2015 General Election Survey indicated that a Northern Ireland voter's view on Brexit is far more likely to correlate with a unionist or nationalist voting preference than any other factor, such as age, gender and income.ⁱⁱ Put simply, the most passionately pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit voters here are also the most passionately unionist and nationalist respectively. As those most vocal in the Assembly elections will also be the ones most engaged in the referendum campaigns, there is a risk that lines of unionist/nationalist division become even more starkly drawn by the prospect of Brexit infiltrating the region's electoral debate.

But Northern Ireland can ill-afford further division. As the region of the UK with the highest rates of economic inactivity, long-term unemployment, youth unemployment and child poverty than any other part of the UK, the need for political action rather than ideological sniping could not be more acute.ⁱⁱⁱ

And yet political discourses on Northern Ireland – from the EU level down – have created a context in which all consideration of the region's experience of EU membership is subsumed within the articles of faith of nationalism/unionism: ideological positions that have little to do with Europe and everything to do with each other.

ⁱ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-45_en.htm

ⁱⁱ <http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/851957/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on data from the NI Labour Market Report (2016) (<https://www.detini.gov.uk/publications/labour-market-report-march-2016>) and the Poverty and Social Exclusion research from the region (<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/northern-ireland-faring-badly>)